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Mythology for Children's Education: A Study of Select Indian English Mythological Texts for Children

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Abstract

Mythology has found an indispensable place in literature, right from understanding human nature to creating a sense of shared national identity. However, the deployment of mythology directed towards education of children is the need of the hour and Indian English children's literature has been seriously involved in that endeavour. In this paper, I look at select texts written for children based on Indian mythology with an aim to educate them on various facets of life like- self growth, social understanding and sensitivity towards environment. Taking all the three facets in detail, the paper shall look at the role of mythology in educating young minds to develop a sense of self as well as harmonious relation with society and environment.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Education, Environment, Mythology, Nation, Self etc.

Introduction

Myths and mythology have always been considered to be primordial and universal. George Grote, a Greek historian is of the opinion that "myth belongs to a past that has never been present." (qtd in Connor 263). It is due to this "temporal deracination" that makes myth universally accessible and literature and culture seem to draw from it without the fear of the myth getting depleted. (Connor 263)

While myth as a category in literature started establishing around the eighteenth century, it was considered a metaphysics that was felt and imagined without the power of ratiocination. Thinkers like Giambattista Vico, Gottfried Lessing, J.G Herder, Schlegel Brothers, Gottlieb Heyne started exploring myths in order to understand human culture. The Romantic writers found their sources of writing in the myths. In the 19th and 20th century, myths were renewed to make sense of the modern world as T.S

Eliot, W.B. Yeats used in most of their poems. It was during this time, that the Indian middle class was formulating its nationalist discourse in order to rebel against the powers of British colonialism. Revival of myths and looking back at a golden fabled past became the steering thought for the nationalist discourse.

Meenakshi Mukherjee in the chapter "Myth as Technique" talks about the importance of myths in the study of literature. She writes:

One reason may be their quality of timelessness. Myths, in spite of their distance from contemporary reality, do have, for that particular group of men to whom they are culturally relevant, a kind of fundamental significance. (Mukherjee 134)

She further writes pertaining to the Indian context that the epics have served as a common background for literary works:

If a world – view is required to make literature meaningful in terms of shared human experience then the Indian epics offer a widely accepted basis of such a common background which permeates the collective consciousness of the whole nation. (135)

While the writers like Raja Rao, Sudhin Ghose, R.K. Narayan, B. Rajan have employed the Indian mythology in their literary works. However, in this paper we shall concern ourselves with the use of mythology in Indian English children's literature.

Mythological tales have occupied an indispensable place in the growing up years of the Indian children through many generations. In the ancient times, children were entertained through mythical tales and performances, although there was no discreet concept of children's literature as such. During the nationalist period, children were introduced to the epics and puranas in order to acquaint them with the rich traditions of the nation. Even after independence, mythology was used as a tool in children's literature to further the task of nation-building. The ACK (Amar Chitra Katha) comics introduced by Anant Pai in the 1960s, with 'Krishna' being one of the first titles, published in 1967. In fact, Pai embarked upon this venture following the discomfiting thought that the young generation was getting alienated from their own culture. An anecdote that is famously associated with Pai is the quiz contest that he watched on television in 1967. Five students from St. Stephen's College, Delhi who participated in the quiz could not answer questions from the Ramayana. This filled him with despair:

Ramayana is part of India's heritage. It has given us role models and taught us values of life. So, I felt unhappy. I felt more unhappy when these children could answer correctly questions on the gods on Mount Olympus – the Greek Gods. That hurt me much more. (Deccan Chronicle 22Nov, 1999)

Along with constructing a sense of a national self, (that Amar Chitra Katha aimed at), mythology was also explored through the lens of psychology and the impact it had on the deepest layers of the subconscious. Joseph Campbell in his seminal work, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* writes that "certain imprints impressed upon the nervous system in the plastic period between birth and maturity are the source of many of the most widely known images of myth" (61). In the Indian context, Sudhir Kakar writes that "an Indian child is encouraged to continue to live in a mythical, magical world for a long time" (Kakar 118), as it becomes a part of his unconscious and manifests in his behavior.

In the cycle of generations, changes in a society's values and institutions, transmitted through the family, inevitably amend or alter the psychic structure of individuals belonging to the society. This psychological change may appear to be a transformation of identity, noticeably in the

superficial 'behavioural' layers of personality, more subtle and gradual in the deeper layers, while the deepest layer (the bedrock of the inner world) may remain relatively unaffected through many generations. (217)

Thus, due to the immense psychological and social impact of mythology on children's mind as well as their identity, it has been deployed for educational purposes covering the fields of self-growth, social understanding and climate change. We shall thus look at the use of mythology in Indian English children's literature for educating the young minds in various facets of life in detail. The paper shall be divided in three sections discussing the three different facets of child's life: self, society and natural environment. The primary texts used in the paper in order to supplement the argument are *Ramayana for Children: The Girl Who Chose*; *Mahabharata for Children: The Boys Who Fought* both by Devdutt Pattanaik; *Our Myths* series by Tulika publishers and *Ma Ganga and the Razai Box* by Geeta Dharmarajan.

Self-Growth

Reading Indian mythology for self-development was initiated by Anant Pai. He established 'Partha'-the Institute of Personality Development in 1978 in order to train the young minds to prepare for life's struggles. 'Partha', the name itself comes from the mythological text Gita, where Arjun (Partha) is trained by Krishna in the battlefield. In the book *How to Achieve Success*, Pai writes that while excavating through the Indian mythology over the years, he has gained knowledge of the allegories associated with those myths.

Over the years, as I delved deep into Hindu mythology and folklore to obtain titles for the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, I have developed a little understanding of the allegories, contained in these myths.

Shiva is the consort of Parvati, who is also referred to as *Shakti*. Shiva means the Auspicious or the Good. Shakti means strength. This myth conveys the great truth that only the person who is strong can be good. Conversely, the one who is weak or rather the one who thinks he is weak, cannot be good. (Pai vii)

Thus, the power to think about oneself as weak or strong lies in the strength of the person. Pai indicates that through the study of Indian mythology, young minds can develop strength, courage and skills to lead a successful life. Taking Pai's idea forward, we shall read two texts *Ramayana for Children: Girl Who Chose* and *Mahabharata for Children: Boys who Fought* by Devdutt Pattanaik in this section to understand how mythology can help the young minds in self-development and prepare them for life.

Some of the prominent retellings of the Ramayana in English from Sita's perspective are *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Sita's Ramayana* (2012) by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar, *A Different Sita* (2011) by Niaz Zaman. My reading through different versions of Sita, was in

search of a girl Sita, who would have been a girl before becoming an ideal woman. However, the childhood of Sita is yet to be represented in the literary world, nevertheless, Devdutt Pattanaik, for the first time addresses Sita as a girl and writes her story for the little girls who need not only idealize her as a woman, but as a little girl.

As the book is subtitled, "The Girl Who Chose", the Ramayana is narrated through the five major choices that Sita made. The agency has been bestowed upon the girl Sita who exercised her power of choice and executed it with utmost dignity. The book is addressed to "those who choose" and a little girl's picture is drawn. Both her palms are open and one of them contains a fruit and the other a leaf indicating that a girl always has a choice in front of her. She is neither powerless, nor helpless. The book introduces the story of Ramayana titled 'The Story of Ravana, Rama, or Sita?' He mentions that it was because of Sita's choices that the Ramayana took its shape.

Ravana does not care for other people's choices, while Rama never makes a choice as, being the eldest son of a royal family, he is always expected to follow the rules. But Sita – she makes five choices. And had Sita not made these choices, the story of Rama would have been very different indeed. (3)

Thinking about her power to choose, as a young girl, Sita contemplates that she did not choose her husband as sometimes one does not get to choose.

I did not choose my husband; my father and Shiva's bow chose Rama for me. Sometimes in life, we don't get to choose. But that's not always a bad thing. You have to trust, and hope for the best. (16)

This is only once that someone else makes a choice for Sita, but she trusted her life. The first important choice that Sita made was to go to the woods for fourteen years with Rama and Lakshman. She made this choice out of care and concern for her husband and brother – in – law. When Rama insisted her not to go to the forest, she replied: "You are bound by rules, but not I, I am free to choose. I choose to follow you." (23)

Sita's freedom of choice unburdens her from helplessness and choicelessness through which she has always been perceived since ages. Further, when Lakshman cut Surpnakha's nose, Sita could apprehend the impending problems. She said, "Every choice has a consequence. We cannot escape the poor woman's rage." (36)

Later, when Lakshman drew a line for Sita's safety, she contemplated on the idea of boundaries. The ideas that propped up on her mind were:

Inside this line is human society, full of rules.

Outside this line is the forest, where there are no rules.

Inside this line, I am safe. Or am I a prisoner?

Outside this line, I am not safe. But am I free? (40)

Contemplating on these ideas, she saw a hermit asking for food. She made a choice that would make her different from the animals. She thought:

Either she could let the hermit be hungry while remaining safe herself. Or she could take a risk and step outside the rekha to feed the poor soul. Sita understood that her choice would help someone and so she decided to take the risk. In the forest, the animal only thinks about its own safety. Not about protecting another animal. This was the difference between animals and humans. Thus, she stepped outside the line to feed the poor hermit. (43)

In making this second choice of crossing the line in order to help another human, Sita is further unburdened of the helplessness of remaining within the lines drawn by society. She has neither broken the rules nor remained within the narrow confines of the society. She made a powerful choice in the name of humanity. She did realize that she had to pay a price for her choice but she did not regret. Her conscience ruled over the consequences of her choices.

Her act of goodness had a bad consequence. But she considered at that moment – if she had to feed the hungry over her own safety, would she do it again? Yes, she said to herself. (43)

While she was in Lanka, she was perturbed with the entire event. Ravana would try to woo her, frighten her in order to win her from Rama. She sat in silence and contemplated, "I can choose to be afraid of Ravana or I can choose to have faith in Rama." (55) The idea that she could have control over her mind, gave her character strength. It is this strength of character that Pattanaik wishes to evolve among the young girls who idealize Sita as a woman.

The third choice Sita made was her refusal to go with Hanuman. She chose to stay there and wait for her husband. In this case she relegated her personal desire and made a choice keeping in mind the reputation of her family. Thus, her third choice is an example of choosing the society over the self. One should develop the wisdom to make such difficult choices. Sita said,

Thank you, Hanuman, for offering to help. But I want my husband to cross the sea, come to Lanka, kill Ravana and rescue me himself, thus restoring the reputation of his family. (62)

After defeating Ravana in the battle, Rama gave Sita a choice to go wherever she wished to as she was free. She was shocked to learn about the confusion regarding her purity in Rama's mind. She decided to prove her love by walking on fire. Although this act of Sita is often looked at as Sita's servility, however Pattanaik in the text endows Sita with an agency and choice. While giving agnipariksha, she thinks that it is her choice to go with Rama, she is not obliged or forced by anyone.

I don't have to go with Rama.

I want to go with Rama.

He does not trust his people. But I do. (81)

After coming back to Ayodhya, the gossip about Sita's purity tumulted Rama and he decided to leave her in the woods. It was at this time that Sita thought she had no choice. She gave in but never let her identity diminish. She raised her children in the forest and years later when Rama asked her to come back to Ayodhya, she denied. "I cannot come back to a city where reputation matters more than love. I will stay in the forest." (99) She decided to go back to mother earth from where she came: "I have done my best as a daughter, sister, wife and mother. Now it is time to go." (100)

In the conclusion, Pattanaik talks in detail about rules and choices. There is a Sita (a strong mind) inside us. The human society is made up of rules and choices and rules are made to help people. Even rules can be challenged and changed if they do not help people. Striking a balance between rules and choices accelerates the society's progress.

Releasing Sita from the glorified victimhood, often idealized by women in India, Devdutt Pattanaik sheds a new light to the Ramayana. Through the rewriting of the Sita myth, the little girls can now find a brave, headstrong, and independent girl archetype in the mythological figure of Sita. The children can now look at themselves and the nation anew, where there are rules that help people and they are independent to make choices, emphatically yet responsibly. The action - consequence equation is portrayed beautifully in the book. Each action is the choice we make, which is like a seed we sow. Each choice germinates into a consequence. The consequence may grow into a beautiful fruit or a poor one but we are responsible for both the fruits. The book ends with the same image as in the cover page. A little girl spreads both her palms with a ripe fruit and a distorted fruit in each of them. The message goes: "If you make a choice, accept all the consequences with grace." (111)

The Mahabharata for Children: The Boys Who Fought

After analyzing the retelling of the Ramayana in terms of choices and rules, we shall look at another retelling by Devdutt Pattanaik. *The Mahabharata for Children* narrates the epic in terms of concepts like dharma, sharing, and humanity.

In the beginning of the epic, the Pandava boys are taught to be united and share things among them equally. On the other hand, the Kaurava boys did not understand the importance of sharing. When the Pandavas asked why did they not share their toys with them, the Kauravas replied, "Today you want our toys. Tomorrow you will want our kingdom. We will share nothing with you Pandavas." (14) It is when they were banished to the forests for losing the entire kingdom in the gambling match that the boys learnt the various facets of life. Krishna advised them: "Let the forest teach you dharma. Travel across Bharata to all the pilgrimage spots, atop the mountains and where the rivers meet." (54)

Arjuna was taught to be generous, and fair and give up his ego by Shiva. He once claimed a hunted boar just because he was a prince. The other hunter was Shiva in disguise who taught him to be generous. "In the forest, there are no princes. No one is entitled to anything. The hunt belongs to the strongest. For humans to accept the truth of the jungle when in the jungle is dharma." (59)

Hanuman teaches Bhima to be kind and humble and not to take undue pride in one's strength: "In the forest, no one has a right of way. Even the strong know that they will one day meet someone stronger. To accept this dharma." (57)

The Pandavas learnt the values of restraint and compassion from the deer. A deer came in Yudhishtira's dream who scolded him for hunting his friends and family. It said "Hunt for food, like animals do. Do not hunt for sport. To follow this is dharma." (58) Later, Yudhishtira discovered that his brothers have died after drinking water from a lake. They did not care to answer heron's questions who lived in that lake. The heron said "Don't think that you are princes in the forest, who can take anything they want. Respect other's territory or face the consequences." (59)

Yudhishtira apologized on behalf of his brothers for trespassing. The heron asked Yudhishtira to name any one of his brothers whom he wishes to stay alive. He chose Nakula, the reason being Nakula was Madri's son, Pandu's second wife. He said that he is alive as Kunti's son, the other wife's son also deserves to be alive. During the gambling match, he had first gambled Nakula as he saw him as his half - brother. Yudhishtira had understood that exclusion is adharma and inclusion is dharma. "By giving Nakula his life back, Yudhishtira shows he loves Madri's sons as much as he loves Kunti's sons. Inclusion is dharma." (61)

Despite following the penance for 13 years, the Pandavas were denied their share of the kingdom on their return. The war was unleashed. The Pandavas fought for survival, the Kauravas fought because they did not wish to share. People died on both sides. Bhishma, who lay on his bed of arrows, gave instructions to uphold dharma.

Dharma is taking care of the weak.

Karma means accepting that all actions, good or bad have consequences.

Anger never solves any problem.

Always give before you receive. Never take. (93)

Years later when the Pandavas along with Draupadi decided to ascend to heaven, it was only Yudhishtira who got to enter. He found his wife and brothers absent and to his shock found the Kauravas in heaven. The gods said, "The Kauravas did not share earth with you. You are not willing to share heaven with them. How are you different?" (103)

Yudhishtira forgave the Kauravas. He learnt that "dharma is about fairness, not revenge. It is about sharing, not arguing. It is about love, not hatred. It is about forgiving, not fighting." (103) It was then the

heaven was filled with everyone smiling and happy. Such a retelling of Mahabharata becomes quite relevant in today's India where everyone is fighting for their share, yet nobody is at peace. The forest, the battlefield is an allegory of India which teaches the young children to cultivate values of compassion, inclusion, love, forgiveness, sharing in order to make the nation into a 'heaven of freedom.'

It is the refusal to share that lead to a war. In the end, the Pandavas and Kauravas are shown sharing their food with one another, an ideal situation that is imagined in the nation – building process. The book ends with a note on the importance of sharing.

As long as we look for excuses, reasons and justifications to not share, the mighty will never take care of the meek and the meek will always hate the mighty. There will be no dharma in human society. If we have to fight, let us fight that urge within us that stops us from sharing that urge that stops us from being human. (107)

In both the texts discussed above, the epics have been narrated from the point of view of young girls and boys which the young readers can easily relate to. By presenting the mythological tales in the form of scenarios and values that the contemporary world can also identify with, these retellings help the young minds develop the strength to choose, decide and practice values for the betterment of self as well as the nation.

Society and Diversity

In this section, we shall look at the re – writing of myths for children that try to alleviate the discriminations based on caste and community. Popular Indian mythology have often been appropriated by a dominant section of society bereaving the other communities of putting up their point of view on those myths. The "Our Myths" series by Tulika Books, an independent publishing house for children based in Chennai, is quite pertinent to understand how the Indian myths are appropriated by the different communities. It currently has five books in the series which present the Indian myths from a different point of view. The blurb in each of these books contain information about the purpose of the series:

Age – old stories, drawn from popular and marginal sources, gently question rigid notions about myths. Through pictures and words, these retold stories encourage different ways of seeing and understanding. They carry forward the spirit of oral storytelling and show how myths change, and still endure.

Presently, there are five books in this series. They are *The Secret God in the Forest* by Anuradha Kumar; *It's All the Same!* by Nina Sabnani; *In Bon Bibi's Forest* by Sandhya Rao; *Hanuman's Ramayana* by Devdutt Pattanaik and *Vyasa's Mahabharata* by Chitra Krishnan. In this paper, we shall read the book *In Bon Bibi's Forest* in detail.

Ibrahim, a Sufi saint left his pregnant wife Gulab Bibi in the forest where she gave birth to two children. The girl was named Bon Bibi (meaning lady of the forest) and the boy was named Shah Tongoli. As Bon Bibi grew up, she realized that she has been born for a special task and went to Makkah and Madina to seek blessings. She returned to protect the forest and its people. One fine day Dokkhin Rai emerged in front of a man Dhona to attack him. Dhona cracked a deal that he would bring food for the monster in return for "seven boats of honey and seven boats of wax" (15). He took a little boy Dukhe as food for the monster, when Bon Bibi emerged with her brother to save the little boy. She asked the monster in anger why he did such evil acts to which he replied,

I don't know what else to do!" he said. "These people, they come and take away everything from the forest. Wood, honey, wax, birds, fishes, molluscs, everything! Should I just sit and watch? You tell me. They are everywhere. They leave me no place to roam, no place to sleep, no place to be! I have to do something to protect myself! They leave me nothing, not even to eat! (20)

Dukhe, the little boy promised that he would make the people understand. Dokkhin Roy agreed not to scare the people on one condition that anyone who entered the forest would take Bon Bibi's permission. People still worship Bon Bibi before entering the forest but Dokkhin Rai is still present and watches out for greedy people like Dhona.

The Bon Bibi myth from the Sundarbans presents a lesser known narrative for children which talks about the harmonious relationship of Hindu – Muslim cultures and man's synchronization with the natural world. The myth teaches the child readers to accept and respect diversity of their nation and at the same time value the resources of nature.

Environment and sustainability

In *Ma Ganga and the Razai Box*, popular mythological figures have been used to educate the child readers on environment and sustainability. A little girl, Yasho lives in the mountainous region of India. She feels very sad to see the river Ganga carrying away all the mud along with it in the rain. An angry Yasho shouts at Ganga,

""Ganga"! She called out boldly. "How dare you take our soil to the sea?" (3)

Ganga replied, "I don't want your soil. Do you think I want to look all muddy? And don't I know the top few inches of soil are important for the village? But if you don't care about it, why should I? Once long ago, Shiva spread his matted hair before me. Find me Shiva's hair and I won't flood your homes. Till then, I'm going away." (6)

She jumped into Yasho's razai box, reluctant to come out of it until the villagers would find her Shiva's matted locks. She gave them one year to find her Shiva's locks. While the villagers were trying to figure out, Yasho shouted in exhilaration as she had a plan.

She said, "Let's plant trees everywhere. The roots and branches of trees are like Shiva's hair. They will hold the soil. They'll make Ma Ganga happy!" (12) The whole village worked hard and turned the barren mountains into a beautiful Greenland. Ma Ganga came out of the box and was happy to see sense returning in people. The people pleaded to stay with them but she said they still had more work to do. After two years Ma Ganga was elated to see "trees and shrubs springing all over the hills and valleys." (21) She said, "Ah! Their roots are like Shiva's matted hair." (24) She was happy to be back amongst the people once again.

The book, with its beautiful pictures convey a message to the children with the help of mythology that the protection of environment is the topmost concerns of the nation in the present times. It also makes them understand that even smallest of the steps can contribute towards a sustainable future. In the end of the book, the mythical story of Ganga, arising from Brahma's water pot and brought to earth by Bhagirathi is narrated in detail. An account of soil erosion is also mentioned with the solution given to plant more and more trees.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the various ways in which Indian mythology have been interpreted in order to educate the children about the most important realms of life: self-growth, society and environment. The timelessness and pertinence of mythology can thus be explored and put to use to educate the young, as it will give them a sense of rootedness in terms of their national identity and will also help them understand and cope with contemporary issues in life.

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